

Endangering a Landmark Nuclear Treaty

Official Washington's political game of heightening tensions with nuclear-armed Russia to get better control of President Trump could destroy a landmark nuclear arms control treaty, as Jonathan Marshall explains.

By Jonathan Marshall

On Aug. 3, President Trump told millions of Twitter followers to “thank Congress” for the fact that “our relationship with Russia is at an all-time & very dangerous low.” The immediate impetus for his remark was congressional passage of new economic sanctions against Russia, but Trump might just as well have pointed to moves by the body to jeopardize a landmark arms control treaty negotiated in 1987 by President Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty was remarkable for prohibiting an entire class of existing weapons, with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers. Ratified by the Senate in 1988, following one of the darkest periods of the Cold War, it led to the destruction of 2,700 missiles, both nuclear and conventional, over a period of about three years.

The treaty also opened the door to on-site inspections and other verification measures that made possible the first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty in 1991, under President George H.W. Bush. Greg Thielmann, a former top State Department intelligence official who advised on the INF treaty negotiations, has called its success “unprecedented” and “one of the world's most dramatic achievements in curbing the nuclear arms race.”

Putting those great accomplishments at risk, the proposed new National Defense Authorization Act, which passed the House in July, authorizes the development of a new land-based missile banned by the INF treaty. A companion Senate bill, which will be considered after the August recess, would fund initial Pentagon development of a similarly prohibited missile.

In each case, the real target of the new missiles proposed by congressional hawks like Republican Sen. Tom Cotton of Arkansas isn't any particular Russian military capability, but the spirit of cooperation and shared interests that made arms control possible in the years from Nixon to Obama.

Objections to Risk

“The INF Treaty is fundamental to European security,” declared a team of distinguished U.S., German, and Russian nuclear arms experts in April. “If the treaty unravels, it will open the door to an arms race in ground-launched

intermediate-range missiles, which will diminish security in both Europe and Asia . . . and undermine the entire regime of nuclear arms control between the United States and Russia.”

The missile-rattling by members of Congress is rooted in Washington’s concern that Russia recently began to deploy an upgraded version of an existing ground-launched cruise missile, dubbed the SSC-8, with a prohibited range beyond 500 kilometers. Russia denies any violation of the treaty, but the U.S. responding to a possible violation by blowing up the entire treaty would be an act of strategic folly.

Tom Collina, an arms control expert with the Ploughshares Fund, told me that he and other independent analysts can’t assess the evidence because it’s so highly classified. But he was impressed by the fact that key members of the Obama administration vouched for it: “These were people I know supported arms control with Russia, and finding this [breach] was very inconvenient. The last thing they wanted was to have to tell the U.S. Senate that Russia is cheating.”

Gen. James Mattis told the Senate Armed Services Committee during its consideration of his nomination to President Trump’s Secretary of Defense, “If Russia is permitted to violate the treaty with impunity, such actions could erode the foundations of all current and future arms control agreements and initiatives.”

But the U.S. response doesn’t have to be hasty or extreme. U.S. defense planners aren’t losing any sleep over the limited Russian deployment of its questionable missiles.

“Given the location of the specific missile and the deployment, they don’t gain any advantage in Europe,” said Air Force Gen. Paul Selva, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in Senate hearings last month.

Evidence and Inspections

A reasonable approach advocated by many experts is to start by confronting the Russians with more specific evidence of their alleged violation. At a press briefing in June, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said his government was ready for an “honest but specific dialogue” and had “no intention to break the treaty.”

The Russians may be using their cruise missile deployment as leverage to force discussion of their own complaint that NATO’s missile-interceptor systems in Eastern Europe have potential offensive uses. Russian military experts claim the launchers used in those systems can house intermediate-range cruise missiles prohibited by the INF treaty.

Russian military leaders have expressed public concerns about the threat of a surprise attack on their command and control centers from such stealthy and precision-targeted missiles. The short flight times of those missiles to Moscow could facilitate the “decapitation” of Russia’s political and military leadership.

Russia’s fears may be misplaced or overblown, but they are fanned by the blatant dishonesty of NATO’s claims that its interceptors are merely designed to defend against ballistic missiles from Iran. Iran has no missiles capable of striking most of Europe. Nor does it have a nuclear weapons program, as confirmed by regular international inspections and the State Department’s own certification.

Moscow’s claims, like Washington’s concerns over Russia’s recent missile deployments, should be amenable to inspection and resolution by panels of technical experts, say nuclear arms experts. The INF treaty created a Special Verification Commission (SVC) to address just such issues.

“U.S. willingness to allow Russian access to deployed [missile interceptor] launchers and Russian willingness to accept on-site monitoring of SSC-8 [cruise missile] launchers at test sites and challenge inspections at suspect deployment sites could lead to a breakthrough in the current compliance stalemate,” writes Thielmann.

Political Obstacles

The technical challenges are real, but Thielmann and other experts suggest the political challenges are even greater. Many congressional hawks evidently don’t want a cooperative resolution of the issue. Although President Trump has sought to work with President Putin, he has also expressed contempt for arms control. (“Let it be an arms race,” Trump told an interviewer in December. “We will outmatch them at every pass and outlast them all.”)

Last but not least, the Pentagon is pushing for a trillion-dollar nuclear “modernization” program and a new generation of smaller nuclear warheads it deems suitable for “warfighting.” Russia, of course, is not standing still, either.

Jon Wolfsthal, the top White House arms control expert under President Obama, reminds us that in today’s poisonous political atmosphere, “The danger(s) of an accidental or unintended conflict . . . are as high as they have been since the collapse of the Soviet Union.”

Given the immense stakes for all humanity, Trump should invoke the spirit of Ronald Reagan to quell moves by congressional conservatives to derail the INF treaty. Their misguided attempts to grab a temporary lead in the nuclear arms

race, instead of pursuing a mutual end to that race altogether, will only put U.S. security more at risk.

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Playing Politics with the World's Future

The strategy of neutering President Trump in his dealings with Russia – and his administration's own ignorance about complex Mideast issues – are combining to create grave dangers, writes ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

Finally ... the U.S. Congress has produced a piece of legislation. And it passed with quasi-unanimous, bi-partisan support. Only its substance is not so much a deep reflection on the foreign policy interests of America, but rather, the desire to hurt, and incapacitate the U.S. President in any future dealings with Russia. (And never mind the worrying impulse towards conflict with Russia this entails, or its collateral damage on others).

The aim has been to see President Trump hog-tied, and "tarred and feathered" for his "risky behavior" on Russia. This aim simply has overpowered any other considerations – such as likelihood that the outside world will conclude that America's ability to pursue or even to have a foreign policy is non-existent in the face of its internal civil war. It is a key juncture. For an overwhelming majority of Democratic and Republican Senators and Congressmen, bringing down "The Donald" is all – and the devil take the consequences for America, in the world.

Senator Dianne Feinstein, D-California, blandly stated that the concerns of U.S. allies come second to the need to punish Russia for its election interference. When asked whether the bill took account of European Union's interests, one of the main authors, Senator John McCain, R-Arizona, said simply: "Not that I know of. Certainly not in the portion of the bill I was responsible for."

Another of the bill's author, Bob Menendez, D-New Jersey, laconically replied to the same question: "Not much, to be honest with you."

McCain carelessly then quipped that essentially that it was "the job of the E.U. to come around to the legislation, not for the legislation to be brought around to them."

The U.S. President had little option but to sign the legislation, but that does not mean that diplomacy is completely blocked. As expected, he issued a Signing Statement (see [here](#)), in which, while accepting the mandate of Congress, Trump took issue with the new Congressional encroachments into his prerogatives (Article Two of the Constitution) in terms of foreign policy, and he reserved the right to decide on how the Congressional mandate might be implemented (i.e. in respect to the quadrilateral negotiations over Ukraine). He has some wriggle room, especially in terms of how the legislation is enforced (or not, as the case might be), but certainly not enough wriggle room to mollify Europe – or, more pertinently, to persuade Russia that America now has anything, substantive to offer; or were it offered, able to be delivered. In other words, for Russia, the U.S., effectively, is severely agreement-incapacitated.

Medvedev's Assessment

Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev wrote in response:

“The signing of new sanctions against Russia into law by the U.S. president leads to several consequences. First, any hope of improving our relations with the new U.S. administration is over. Second, the U.S. just declared a full-scale trade war on Russia. Third, the Trump administration demonstrated it is utterly powerless, and in the most humiliating manner, transferred executive powers to Congress. This shifts the alignment of forces in U.S. political circles.

“What does this mean for the U.S.? The American establishment completely outplayed Trump. The President is not happy with the new sanctions, but he could not avoid signing the new law. The purpose of the new sanctions was to put Trump in his place. Their ultimate goal is to remove Trump from power.” (Emphasis added).

The key new provision in law is dubbed *The Russia Sanctions Review Act of 2017*. It codifies into law past sanctions on Russia imposed by previous Administrations, and prohibits the President from lifting any existing sanction against Russia without the prior permission of Congress. The law states that the process of securing such consent requires that the President send to Congress a (prior) report stating and arguing the presumed benefit that would accrue to the U.S. through the lifting of any sanction. The Congress then may institute hearings on the President's report, and on the merit of his argument about the potential quid pro quo – justifying his proposed action. In the light of these hearings, Congress may then [consider](#) a resolution of approval or disapproval (within 30 days of receiving the President's statement).

The influential *Lawfare* site [points out](#), however, that “the provision is drafted quite broadly to cover actions *that have any ameliorative effect* despite falling

short of formally lifting sanctions. For example, congressional review is required for a waiver, “a licensing action that significantly alters United States’ foreign policy with regard to the Russian Federation,” and any action which would allow Russia to regain access to properties in Maryland and New York” (Emphasis added).

In short, Congress gave itself a 30-day review period to vote down any changes Trump tries to make in terms of America’s foreign relations with Russia.

Offending Europe

These are the teeth, but the Act has other little flourishes: The legislation targets the Russian energy sector, allowing the U.S. to sanction companies involved in developing Russian oil pipelines. It “would almost surely affect a controversial pipeline project between Russia and Germany known as Nord Stream 2, which is owned by Gazprom but includes financial stakes from European companies. The project aims to carry Russian natural gas under the Baltic Sea, bypassing countries like Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic States,” as the *New York Times* reports.

Some may see these events simply as the riposte to alleged Russian intervention in America’s internal affairs (as Feinstein has argued), but polls (even CNN polls) suggest that there are very obvious political limits to the Establishment (in both parties) using “Russia-gate” as a mechanism to mobilize and widen public support for removing President Trump. Polls indicate that 79 percent of Republicans are “not at all” or “not very” concerned about Trump’s alleged links with Russia, and that inversely, precisely the same proportion, 79 percent, of Democrats precisely are “very” or “somewhat” concerned. (55 percent of Independents side with Republicans with 37 percent “not at all” and 18 percent “not very” concerned). The point here is that the Republican support for Trump’s desire for détente with Russia has not eroded one jot, whereas the “concern” of the Independents and even among Democrats is eroding somewhat.

This is the crux: the clique around former CIA head John Brennan *et al* have put their shirt on “Russia-gate” to bring down Trump – claiming scandal. But what goes around – quite often – comes comes around. Unless the Establishment can keep up the tempo of innuendo or produce new revelations, “Russia-gate” may just become a stale narrative – or a butt of satire. Worse, the meme could turn and bite the hand of those who have been feeding it. There may too be other skeletons in the cupboard, but belonging to the other party: like who paid Fusion GPS (who were commissioned to produce the “dirty dossier” on Trump)? Might the murdered Seth Rich story take another turn? Or, the fugitive former DNC Chairwoman’s IT staffer, Imran Awan, give the narrative a different twist? Or something as yet unknown.

Vague Sanctions

How far will the anti-Russian attrition go? The *Ron Paul Institute* sees in one section of the Act, the possibility that websites which take a line in opposition to Russia sanctions could be held to be doing the work of Russian intelligence – by seeking to influence readers in a manner that Russian intelligence would want. Might this be interpreted as “engaging in transactions” – albeit, over the internet? (The Act specifies punishment for “persons” who are “engaging in transactions with the intelligence or defense sectors of the Government of the Russian Federation.”)

The author writes, [that] at first sight, one might think he is reading too much into the text, “however as a twelve-year Capitol Hill veteran bill-reader, I can assure you that these bills are never written in a simple, expository manner. There is always a subtext, and in this case we must consider the numerous instances where the Director of Central Intelligence and other senior leadership in the US intelligence community have attempted to establish the idea that foreign news channels such as RT or Sputnik News, are not First Amendment protected press, but rather tools of a foreign intelligence organization.”

So, are Trump’s hopes for détente with Russia all done? Too early to say, I suggest. Medvedev seems categorical, but maybe his dark prognostication is intended more to underline to Americans that their relations with Russia are not some domestic “game show” – but rather, are profoundly serious. For the time being, substantive U.S. politics with Russia will be on “a long vacation.”

The deeper question is whether the U.S. Deep State is overreaching itself. First, we have this sanctions bill, and then the news that special counsel Robert Mueller, as part of his investigation into the Trump campaign’s potential dealings with the Kremlin, is using a Grand Jury to issue subpoenas. While the use of a Grand Jury does not necessarily mean an indictment is imminent, it is a tool to compel witnesses to testify or force people to turn over sensitive documents that may aid investigators in their probe.

It is a sign of a yet more aggressive approach to gathering “Russia-gate” evidence – a search that will now encompass all the Trump family’s financial affairs. Overreach? (So far, evidence of misdeed, is missing.)

As indicated earlier, Trump’s Republican base (unlike support from the Republican establishment) is not eroding, but rather is becoming angered and resentful. The more the MSM and the East Coast élites attack the deplorables’ “alt” news and websites – the greater the pushback, it seems. The divisions in America are too embittered now, for any thought that America can somehow re-wind the tape, and just start again with Obama having left office – as though Trump

never had happened.

Strategic Incoherence

Whereas, America's Russia foreign policy clearly has been zombie-fied for now, the policy dysfunction goes much wider than Russia (and this cannot be laid at the feet of the Deep State). The policy in the Middle East simply, is strategically incoherent:

Last Tuesday, President Trump, standing beside Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri heaped Lebanon with praise: "Lebanon is on the front lines in the fight against ISIS, al-Qaeda *and Hezbollah*," Trump said. Hariri had – delicately – to correct the President: Hizbullah is a member of his governing coalition, and is a part of his government, and is his ally in parliament. Actually, Lebanon is fighting ISIS and al-Qaeda in Syria, precisely via Hezbollah.

But this trivial incident should not be written off as some distracted President "mis-speaking": rather it is symptomatic of how dysfunctional the West Wing has become in respect to the Middle East. There seems to be no adult in the team – just jaundiced ignorance that does not bother to try to understand Middle East complexities.

Joe Scarborough sums this condition well in an article which – whilst highly complimentary to the personal qualities of Trump's family – also warns against "the stubborn arrogance that often infects the winning side of Presidential campaigns." Trump's victory led his son-in-law to believe "he could reinvent government like Al Gore, micromanage the White House like James Baker, and restructure the Middle East like Moses. Kushner's confidence seemed to reach its apex," Scarborough continues, "whenever the subject turned to Middle East peace. His bizarre belief that the world began anew the day Trump was inaugurated was exposed again this week when a leaked audiotape caught Kushner telling White House interns: *"We don't want a history lesson. We've read enough books."*

Well perhaps he needs to read some books on Iran, before deciding to call Iran in default on JCPOA (the accord that tightly restricts Iran's nuclear program). He does not need to like Iran, but merely to understand that it is a major regional power (with real "battalions" at its command), and, unlike most in the Middle East, is capable of acting shrewdly, effectively and forcefully – if needs be.

Mishandling a Crisis

The sense of an absence of strategic knowledge in the West Wing is not confined to Trump's adversaries, by the way. Iran sees the U.S. calling "Iran in default of JCPOA" as merely serving to cement its fast growing alliance with Russia and

China – but the complaint has also found an (unexpected) home in Israel, too – for example, see [this](#), from one of Israel’s most well-connected journalists, Ben Caspit:

“The story that best illustrates this situation occurred last week when the Temple Mount crisis threatened to ignite the entire Middle East in a global conflagration originating in the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Throughout that entire crisis, the US administration was effectively AWOL. Although they attempted to take credit for some deep involvement in efforts to reach a solution, the truth is that the Americans were not a significant factor during the harshest days of the crisis, when it looked like the entire Middle East would spiral downward into a new round of violence.

“President Trump himself was not involved in events as they unfolded. His special envoy, Jason Greenblatt, lost his standing as an ‘impartial mediator’ in the very first days of the crisis. One senior Palestinian source told *Al-Monitor* on condition of anonymity that ‘Greenblatt picked a side and represented Netanyahu throughout the crisis ... the Americans’ behaviour throughout the crisis only furthered the feeling prevalent in Ramallah over the past few weeks that Greenblatt and Jared Kushner are irrelevant.”

“ ‘They are completely unfamiliar with the other side,’ [another Palestinian source told Caspit] ‘they don’t understand the region, and they don’t understand the material. You can’t learn about what is happening here in a seminar lasting just a few weeks...’

“A senior Israeli minister speaking on condition of anonymity added, ‘The Americans aren’t really a presence here. They let us do whatever we want. They don’t set the tone, and they don’t dictate the agenda.’

“Ostensibly, this near freedom of action should be the dream of the Israeli right. But even among them, people are beginning to express their concern about how things are unfolding. ‘This was as clear as can be during the [Temple Mount crisis](#). There was no responsible adult in the mix.’ ”

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